The Drama of Language

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3. The Consistency of Goethe’s *Tasso*

It is no longer fashionable to dismember a work of literature for adventitious biographical reasons; our critical bias is holistic, or “organic,” and we hesitate to do violence to the unity of a poem for no better reason than that we know something of the circumstances of its composition. If *Tasso* criticism seems to form an exception to this rule—if it has again and again led to attempts to separate the “Urtasso” layer of the play from the “Italian” layer—the motive is not the old positivistic delight in anatomizing, but rather a very genuine uneasiness, a real sense that there is something the matter with *Tasso* and a wish to discover what ails it.

The diagnosis has been fairly unanimous: the play is inconsistent; it suffers from undigested “Urtasso” matter. Between 1780 and 1789 Goethe—and with him his conception of the poet’s function and place in the world of men—changed profoundly, so that when he tried to incorporate “Urtasso” fragments in the final version, he was bound to fail, the old conceptions and attitudes proved unassimilable. The play (so this argument runs) is therefore not comprehensible except insofar as we are able to distinguish the earlier elements and so to restore two versions, each coherent within itself and each expressing a distinct phase in Goethe’s development.

Thus *Tasso* becomes something of a test case in the great critical debate: Are any data other than those given in the work itself admissible of interpretation? Can we properly understand the play if we do not know—or choose to ignore—that its inception and its completion are separated by eight epochal years of Goethe’s life? The most sharply defined opposing positions in this debate have been taken by Wolf­dietrich Rasch and Walter Silz.1 Professor Rasch considers speculations about the “Urtasso” idle or even obstructive to a true apprehension of Goethe’s meaning, while Professor Silz declares: “Any interpretation that would prove *Tasso* a cogent play and unified work of art, objectively, abstracting from all genetic and personal implications, will never be satisfactory.” Refusing to surrender his critical judgment to a doctrine of Goethean infallibility, Professor Silz draws up a long list of what he considers inconsistencies in the play; these, he believes, are facts which the critic is bound to mark and condemn but which the biographer can explain.
I should like to make a case for—and against—both these critics, in the conviction that at crucial points they have not fully confronted the problems which their approaches have—very properly and illuminatingly—raised. Professor Silz is right in probing sharply for inconsistencies in Tasso, but I find myself unable to agree with his claim that only biography can resolve them. Professor Rasch is right in insisting that we must try to understand Tasso as it stands, but at times he glides too easily, I think, over some of the very real difficulties the play contains. That is to say: I think that if we are to get a valid interpretation, we must try to join a keen awareness of the play’s “inconsistencies” with a firm purpose to treat it as a meaningful and coherent whole.

My own position is perhaps most readily clarified by an analogy between the method of literary interpretation and that of science. Where the interpreter discovers an “inconsistency,” he is in the position of the scientist who has detected an “inconsistency” in nature. To the scientist this discovery means that there is a conflict, not between two facts or sets of facts, but rather between a fact and a hitherto accepted interpretation. Since his enterprise is the formulation of principles, or “laws,” which are valid for all the observable facts they are designed to describe—and since, therefore, the one axiom he cannot dispense with is the uniformity (“infallibility”) of nature—he abandons the law or sets about revising it in such a way that it will be consistent with the new fact. If he cannot find a formula that fits all the observable facts, he may, indeed, resign himself to working with two conflicting ones, but the finding of the resolving formula remains one of his chief aims. Analogously, the interpreter’s business is to find the “law,” the descriptive formula which accounts for all the facts in the verbal microcosm, the poem. For all we know, there may be a Being that interrupts at will the uniform behavior of matter, but science cannot exist except as it discounts this possibility. For all we know, the poet may take liberties with the uniform behavior of the elements that constitute the poem; but interpretation cannot exist except as it discounts this possibility. To an interpreter, an “inconsistency” should mean that he has not read aright, that he must revise the categories or principles which he thought were valid.

That is why we must keep our eyes open for “inconsistencies”; they compel us to develop more and more comprehensive, valid, “true” formulas and so, we trust, to penetrate farther and farther into the heart of the matter of the poem. But it is even more important that, once we have discovered them, we do not rest satisfied with chalking up an error against the creator. Perhaps there is, in the end, no other explanation;
but the possibility always exists—and the greater the poet, the greater
the possibility—that the impasse we have come to is of our own devis-
ing: that it is the result of our inflexibility, our inability to break free of
deeply ingrained habits of perception and reasoning. Properly, interpret-
tation begins with the discovery of an “inconsistency.” If the “New
Critics” seem to delight in puzzles and to find puzzling poems peculiarly
suited to their method, it is not from perversity, but from a very sound
instinct regarding what they are about: they are not so much critics as
interpreters, and puzzles are what interpretation, like science, thrives on.

But the real problem is not to be solved a priori; the proof of the
methodological pudding is in the eating. I must—and I think I can—
show that the axiom of infallibility yields results by forcing us to try to
resolve “inconsistencies.” I will confine myself to a particularly flagrant
one, which has troubled not only Professor Silz but virtually every critic
who has not (like Rasch) preferred to pass it over in silence. The com-
plex of facts involved is the “character” of Antonio; the scene in ques-
tion is the opening one of Act V. Antonio begins by informing Alfons
that Tasso stubbornly insists on leaving Ferrara, and then launches into
an inventory of the poet’s foibles so spiteful that, as Staiger comments,
his remarks “selbst in seinem Munde fast erschreckend wirken [even in
his mouth have an almost frightening effect]” (Goethe, I, 389). A few
moments earlier Antonio had assured Tasso of his friendship and prom-
ised him his good offices, a few moments later Tasso calls him “edler
Mann.” In this scene, however, he employs all his considerable resources
to blacken Tasso’s character, to increase the ill will of Alfons (who is
already “verdriesslich”) and to portray his rival as an arrogant, spoiled,
and ridiculous troublemaker. In fact, Antonio is so possessed with vin-
dictiveness that he does not shrink from turning buffoon and performing
a scurrilous and degrading farce to drive home his point. Or so it seems.

I think I may claim that in choosing this scene I am confronting the
problem of inconsistency where it most compellingly invites us to fall
back on the theory of undigested “Urtasso” matter. But again I might
add: “or so it seems.” For what does this theory here imply? Nothing
less than that Goethe was incapable of avoiding (or eliminating) a
scene so stridently out of tune that it grates on the ear of the most
casual listener. Even if one were to grant (though there is not a shred of
evidence for it) that the scene was already composed in 1780/81—what
possessed Goethe to retain it? The play is too long as it is, and nothing
in the scene is remotely necessary to the plot. By taking Goethe at his
most “inconsistent,” I am pointing up the inherent weakness of the
“biographical” explanation: it allows of no a fortiori; it gets weaker
Consistency of Goethe’s Tasso

where it should be getting stronger. In proportion as an inconsistency becomes more flagrant, it appears more and more “wilful”—that is, willed by the poet—so that, unless we assume that Goethe deliberately set out to write a faulty, incoherent play, we are compelled to ask: What did he mean by this? And this question does not lead us into Goethe’s biography, but straight to where we, as interpreters, belong: the text. What do we find there?

The dramatic situation is this: Antonio would like to keep Tasso from leaving, not because he suddenly loves him, but because reconciliation is the task—the “Geschäft”—with which Alfons has charged him (II.v). Even Leonore’s artful playing up on his jealousy (III.iv) has not succeeded in deflecting him from his goal; he doesn’t want to bear the blame for Tasso’s departure. But the poet’s ultimatum leaves him no choice, if he cannot persuade Alfons to let Tasso go gracefully, Tasso, overwrought as he is, will himself demand his dismissal and not only create a disagreeable scene but, no doubt, incur the serious and lasting displeasure of the prince (IV.iv). So Antonio is in the unenviable position of having to reconcile two contradictory wishes; he has a task worthy of the highest diplomatic skill. And since he has declared himself Tasso’s friend, he has not only one interest to represent in this conflict, but both; as a man of honor and a loyal subject, he must represent them equally.

Now if we assume that he is not a man of honor and has deceived Tasso in his declaration of friendship, his behavior is inexplicable. He might, in that case, simply have refused to be Tasso’s ambassador, then Tasso would have stormed to Alfons and presumably have won a dismissal the very opposite of gracious—a banishment. And, with Tasso disgraced, Antonio would have been the final victor. But even if this course seemed still too risky to him—after all, Alfons might still have held him responsible for being the prime cause of all the unpleasantness—all such risk is at an end at the outset of our scene, because there Alfons expressly, and in retraction of his earlier judgment (II.v), absolves Antonio of all responsibility: “Ich schreib es dir auf keine Weise zu [I hold you in no way responsible]” (l. 2864). Alfons is by now so annoyed at Tasso’s obstinacy that he has reassessed the guilt for the quarrel to the point of completely exculpating Antonio. All Antonio would have to do is to stand aside and let the sovereign wrath take its course.

Instead, he launches into his apparently quite superfluous attack. And what does he accomplish? The very opposite of what—if he still hates Tasso—he should wish. Alfons’ first words in the scene are: “Ich bin
verdriesslich [I am irritable]” (l. 2836), but his last speech begins: “Ich bin's zufrieden [That satisfies me]” (l. 2979), and he goes on to grant Tasso a leave which is not merely gracious, but actively solicitous, and which provides for the poet’s eventual return to the court.

Of course we might conclude that this is an instance of Antonio’s being hoist with his own petard; if we share Professor Silz’ very low opinion of Antonio’s diplomatic skill, this conclusion, as such, would not be unreasonable. But not only is the evidence of the play uniform in attesting Antonio’s skill; more important is that this explanation would leave us still deeper in the lurch. The contradiction between a sinister intrigant and the “edle Mann” as whom we are manifestly expected to accept him a few scenes later is bad enough; it becomes wholly incomprehensible if Antonio is not left even the dignity of skill. For then the “edle Mann” is nothing more than the old farce’s stock figure of utter contempt, der geprellte Teufel. And Goethe here is nothing more—indeed less—than a clumsy hack.

So—back to the text. The scene clearly reveals how Alfons is brought around from his initial “verdriesslich” to the final “zufrieden.” His anger abates as Antonio’s spite increases: “Ich hab es oft gehört und oft entschuldigt [I have often heard all this and excused it often]” (l. 2917), “Du hätttest Recht, Antonio, wenn ... [You would be right, Antonio, if ...]” (l. 2935). Antonio leads Alfons to see the maligned Tasso in a more and more favorable light by forcing the prince to become the poet’s advocate; he allows himself to be “set straight” and thereby provides a harmless outlet for Alfons’ anger. It is hardly overstating the matter if we say that Antonio sacrifices his personal dignity to the difficult task he has assumed: to obtain for Tasso a gracious dismissal.

This reading of the scene is, I believe, at least as tenable as the traditional one, and it has the very telling advantage of making Antonio’s behavior jibe with the final judgment which Goethe wants us to form of him. But does that suffice? Have I offered more than an ad hoc explanation which has nothing to recommend it except that it acquits Goethe of the charge of exceedingly poor judgment or outrageously poor workmanship? If it does no more than that, it only raises a new difficulty. Tasso criticism furnishes abundant evidence that this scene—if we assume my reading of it to be correct—is highly (indeed, it might seem: perversely) misleading. If Goethe wanted to show that Antonio turns into a loyal and effective friend, why did he write a scene which virtually everyone has felt to be completely unfitted to this end? Why should he wilfully put stumbling blocks in the path of our understanding?

To answer this objection I must be able to show that this peculiar way
of exhibiting Antonio's loyalty has implications—i.e., meanings—beyond the immediate one. By a procedure apparently so strange, Goethe jars us into attending to a question quite apart from the simple one of Antonio's moral stature. The question is: Does Antonio tell the truth? Does he just "talk like that" in order to accomplish his purpose, while he "really" thinks Tasso a fine fellow? Ambassadors, by Wotton's famous punning definition, "lie abroad for their country"; does Antonio lie abroad for his friend?

No, he doesn't lie (good diplomats don't); what he says of Tasso is confirmed at every point by Alfons. But neither, surely, does he tell the truth. And precisely this, I suggest, is the intention of the scene: to show in action a mode of speech to which the categories truth and falsehood are entirely irrelevant. Antonio speaks to accomplish a certain end; and judged by his success (by which alone he can be judged), he speaks superlatively well. What he thinks, how he feels about Tasso, we have no means of knowing, the pure "states-man" does not speak to reveal himself and the truth that is in him, but to accomplish a purpose. What we are to discover in the scene, therefore, is not that Antonio is spiteful and treacherous, nor that he is generous and loyal, but rather that he is not the kind of man whose inner truth is to be got at from what he says. For him, as well as to him, actions speak louder than words; he is to be known only by what he does.

This leads us farther, because Tasso is Antonio's antithesis. Tasso, we may infer, judges language solely under the categories truth and falsehood. Because he does so, he considers all speaking that is absichtlich as lying. It is worth noting that in the whole play he is the only one who utters real lies, as when he answers Leonore's proposal to come to Florence:

Gar reizend ist, was du mir sagst, so ganz
Dem Wunsch gemäss, den ich im stillen nähre. (ll. 2426–27)

[What you say to me is quite attractive, so entirely in agreement with the wish that I secretly foster.]

In fact, he raises deception to the level of a principle of conduct:

Wer spät im Leben sich verstellen lernt,
Der hat den Schein der Ehrlichkeit voraus.
Es wird schon geln, nur übe dich mit ihnen. (ll. 3107–9)

[If one learns to dissemble late in life, he has the advantage of the appearance of honesty. You will manage, just practice the art with them.]
He does so, not, of course, because he is by nature dishonest, but on the contrary, because he is so fanatically honest—has so absolute an idea of the truth function of speech—that he feels surrounded by "liars": people who talk to gain ends.

It is for this reason that, in one sense, Antonio and Tasso exchange roles midway in the play. Until the end of Act II Antonio is the divisive force, while Tasso strives for union; in the last two acts Tasso is the divisive force, while Antonio strives for union. Why the turnabout? In the beginning, Tasso's mode of speech is the appropriate one: the speech of friends who pursue no hidden designs, who want only to reveal themselves and their truth to each other. In the half real, half unreal world of the idyllic park Tasso feels at home; but for Antonio it is "fremdes Land," so that he says:

Vergebt, wenn ich . . .
. . . weder Zeit noch Ort,
Noch, was ich sage, wohl bedenken kann. (ll. 736–38)

[Forgive me, if I . . . can properly consider neither time nor place, nor what I say.]

What he needs in order to speak properly is a purpose; so that when he is given a beneficent one (at the end of Act II), he speaks admirably—to the purpose. (When his passions give him a malignant one—in the quarrel scene—he speaks equally admirably—to that purpose.) But a purpose in speaking is precisely what Tasso despises and fears; and so, as soon as he feels compelled to speak in this fashion, he lies and with every word widens the gap between himself and the others.

It has often been observed that Goethe took the greatest pains to keep the two antagonists morally equivalent. I hope the preceding paragraphs have further buttressed that observation. The moral balance is so exact because we are not supposed to sit in judgment over the two men; we are supposed to apprehend two modes of being—which in Goethe's poetry always means two modes of speaking. When Antonio "etwas Menschlichs in dem Busen fühlt [feels human frailty]" (l. 2004), he becomes dangerous; to speak properly, he must have a proper purpose assigned to him by the state, since he is the "states-man," the functionary": "Was gelten soll, muss wirken und muss dienen [If something is to count, it has to function and be of use]" (l. 671). But when Tasso speaks in this manner, denying his true "Gefühl," he becomes dangerous, to speak properly, he must give voice to what is within him:
Doch schöner ist's, wenn uns die Seele sagt,
Wo wir der feinen Vorsicht nicht bedürfen  
(ll. 1211–12)

[But it is finer if our soul tells us when we do not need subtle caution.]

And so it is that in the final scene Antonio is almost silent (of 167 lines he has a mere 24) but does the deed that puts his humanity beyond doubt: wordlessly, without protestations of friendship, he steps up to the desperate poet and takes his hand. He is ein Mann der Tat. Tasso, conversely, accepts the impossibility of fulfilling himself in action: “Ich gebe mich, und so ist es getan [I surrender, and thus all is over]” (l. 3381). He speaks, and in speaking discovers his true function, his mode of self-fulfilment:

Und wenn der Mensch in seiner Qual verstummt,
Gab mir ein Gott, zu sagen, wie ich leide.  
(ll. 3432–33)

[And when in their torment men remain mute, a god gave me the power to tell how I suffer.]

He is ein Mann des Wortes.

A full development of this theme would finally involve, I am convinced, a full interpretation of the play—that is to say, the formulation of the “law” which would reveal Tasso as a wholly consistent verbal universe, or “consequent Composition” (to quote Goethe’s own judgment of his play). This is not the occasion to attempt such an interpretation; but I trust that what I have suggested of it is enough to prove my point: that Goethe had a compelling reason for writing V.i precisely as he did. Not a compulsive reason, as though he had to get some old hatreds off his chest, and let the devil take the play. But a compelling one: a certain meaning had to be put across, and he saw no other—at least no better—way to do it.

Here, of course, the critic may step in and say: “I still don’t like it. This is not the best of all possible worlds; the thing could have been done more simply, more neatly, without creating so much puzzlement.” Saying this devolves upon the critic the task of showing how it should have been done; but that, surely, is not an unfair demand to make of those who reject the doctrine of the poet’s infallibility. And there is still another position the critic can take: even though he admit the play to be perfect, he needn’t like it. We may justifiably feel that the best of all possible worlds is nevertheless pretty miserable, or pretty dull. I don’t believe that King Lear could be shown to be as perfect as Tasso; but I
should think him a very poor critic who therefore decided that Tasso
was the greater play. The critic works with a set of values different from
those of the interpreter, since he is not concerned solely with meaning
but with that elusive quality—beauty—and since, where he finds it, he
tries to be contagious about it. The interpreter tries to demonstrate; it
is not his business to persuade us that the poem is beautiful, any more
than it is the scientist's business to persuade us that the world is glorious.
He tries to show how it works; having done so, he leaves the critic to
decide whether his demonstration has sharpened our sense of the poem's
beauty. (I believe that in some way and in some measure it inevitably
will, though I am not prepared to say how. In any case, the problem is
in good part academic, since no interpreter in his right mind would
bother to waste the very considerable effort of an interpretation on a
poem that he did not, as critic, think highly of.)

I should say, then, that we cannot dispense with the “toughminded-
ness” which frankly recognizes and probes the apparent errors and
inconsistencies of even the most venerable poets. But neither can we
dispense with the working hypothesis that the poet is infallible. For if
we do, we are, in the face of an “inconsistency,” committed to judging
before we have made every effort to understand. That is why biographi-
cal information so often is more of a hindrance than a help: it offers us
far too easy an escape from the possibly laborious task of pushing
through to the poet's last intention. There are two kinds of response to
the reading of poetry: the too ready acquiescence and the too ready
judgment. What poetry of the first rank demands of us is a precarious
balance between acquiescence and judgment. If we can maintain it,
poets like Goethe will reward us with unsuspected meanings and,
beyond them, with the severe pleasure we derive from seeing a grand
and yet minutely articulated structure.